HTML Tutorial (III): Developing an Eye for Style

*By Kevin Savetz**

When page layout applications first made home publishing possible in the mid-1980s, they gave computer users the power to create their own newsletters and product advertisements. But as every student of design knows, while page layout applications give you the power to create, they do not impart design skills.

Today, anyone with access to a server and a few hours to learn HTML can create a World Wide Web page. However, it takes more than software to make Web pages that people want to read and return to. Generating repeat visits is the real challenge of creating a Web site. As so many would-be publishers learned a decade ago, there's a difference between having the tools and learning how to use them effectively. With that, we will take a glimpse at how to create Web pages that work.

This article, the last in a three-part series on HTML, addresses issues of style and effective presentation. Parts I and II, in the March and April newsletters, introduced the elements of HTML and the techniques for linking. The author, Kevin Savetz, is taking time off from his Help Desk column to write the series. You can visit his personal home page at* ***http://www.northcoast.com/~savetz/savetz.html.* *For additional ideas on effective Web design, see the Internet World report on page 7.*

Working With Text

Whenever possible, use "logical" tags like <STRONG> and <EMPHASIS> to mark up your text rather than "physical" tags like <BOLD> and <ITALIC>. This gives the browser more control over how text will be displayed on her screen. It's a way of specifying *what* you want to convey, not *how* to convey it, which is browser-specific.

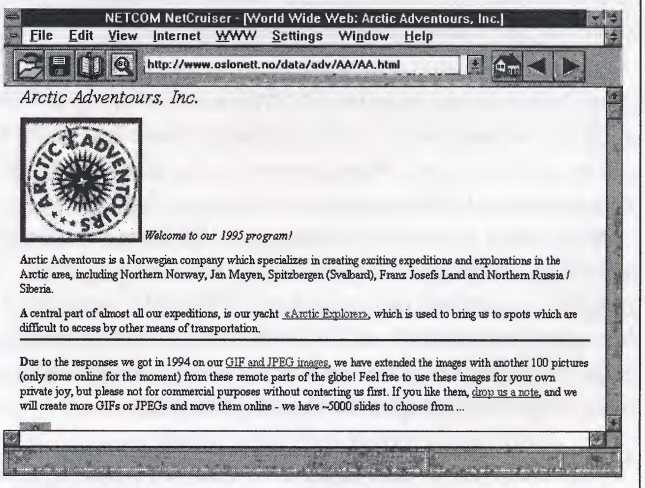
Spellcheck, spellcheck, spellcheck. This should be common sense, but apparently it isn't. There's nothing like a few careless spelling errors to cause users to lose faith in your Web page—and your company. (We've even seen Web pages where the company's own name was misspelled.)

Use navigational links with care, and label them appropriately. Is it intuitive to users what will happen if they click on a highlighted phrase or image? Remember that users don't know their way around your Web pages as well as you do. Careful explanation of your links will keep your readers from becoming frustrated. Use the same links, such as arrow icons, in the same places in all Web pages at your site, and make a special page explaining your navigational system. Don't provide browser-specific instructions such as "choose Back from the Navigation menu."

Breaking Up Text

The <P> tag is useful for separating paragraphs of text—it separates paragraphs and puts some space between them. **If you're linking very short one-sentence paragraphs, the <P> tag can make things look awkward. Instead, use the
 (line break) tag,** which puts less space between the adjacent paragraphs.

Break up your document into meaningful segments. Sometimes this means splitting your information into several linked pages, sometimes it means systematic use of headers and anchors, as explained in the previous articles in this series. Which to use? One tactic is to keep pages as short and small as possible to speed up downloading, but not so short that only one paragraph or


NETCOM NetCruiser - [World Wide Web: Arctic Adventours, Inc.]
File Edit View Internet WWW Settings Window Help
http://www.oslonett.no/data/adv/AA/AA.html
Arctic Adventours, Inc.
ARCTIC ADVENTOURS
Welcome to our 1995 program!
Arctic Adventours is a Norwegian company which specializes in creating exciting expeditions and explorations in the Arctic area, including Northern Norway, Jan Mayen, Spitzbergen (Svalbard), Franz Josefs Land and Northern Russia / Siberia.
A central part of almost all our expeditions, is our yacht «Arctic Explorer», which is used to bring us to spots which are difficult to access by other means of transportation.
Due to the responses we got in 1994 on our GIF and JPEG images, we have extended the images with another 100 pictures (only some online for the moment) from these remote parts of the globe! Feel free to use these images for your own private joy, but please not for commercial purposes without contacting us first. If you like them, drop us a note, and we will create more GIFs or JPEGs and move them online - we have ~5000 slides to choose from ...

This home page for a Norwegian company that organizes Arctic expeditions was recognized in the Best of the Web '94 contest. Notice the clearly labeled links from the home page to the site's most appealing content—downloadable images.

For More Ideas about Web Design

✔ Do's and Don'ts of Web Design: **http://millkern.com/do-dont.html**

✔ HTML Document Style Guide: **http://www.che.ufl.edu/help/style1/index.html**

✔ An index of many online style guides: **http://www.stars.com/Vlib/Providers/Style.html**

✔ Style Guide for Online Hypertext: **http://info.cern.ch/WWW/Provider/Style/Overview.html**

less of text appears on the screen at a time. When you need to keep lots of information on one page, **use horizontal rules to visually break your document.**

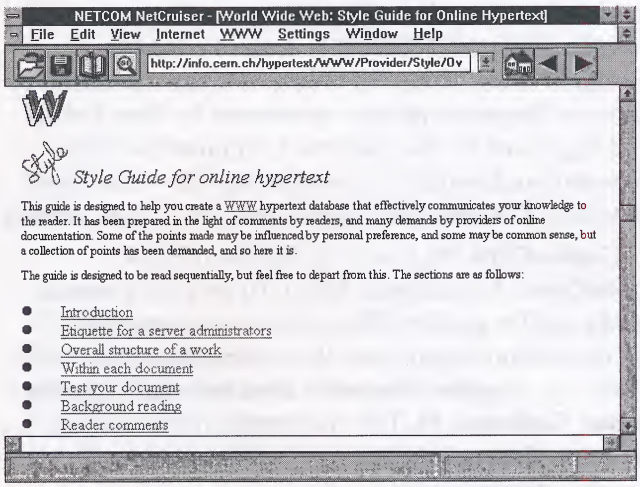
There are two ways to create a horizontal rule: use an inline GIF image, or use the <HR> tag. A GIF image gives you more control over the look and color of the rule, adding personality to your document, but the <HR> tag downloads faster.

Graphic Elements

Many of the people who will see your Web page don't have high-end computers and fast connections: it's important to design with these people in mind. **Keep your inline images as small—under 20 kilobytes each—as possible. Also, make liberal use of inline graphics as "thumbnail" buttons** that point to larger, more detailed pictures (see the second article in this series). That way, those who have the time and bandwidth to download your 300 kb image can do so.

When creating a button that points to a large graphic file, movie, or sound file, it's a good idea to tell the reader the file format and size. For instance, you might include a line such as: "See the groundbreaking of our Peoria store (Quicktime, 900K)."

Finally, **remember that not all users have graphical Web browsers.** The image-laden masterpiece you've created may look great in Netscape, but may be useless for Lynx users and others who don't automatically download inline images, and who only see the word [IMAGE] in place of your graphics. So, use the ALT tag to tell your text-based friends what they're missing. For example, <IMG SRC="logo.gif" ALT="Arlo's Exotic Pets Logo"> will give those without graphics a text version—"Arlo's Exotic Pets Logo"—of the graphic they're missing. And because graphical browsers differ widely, make sure to test your page using as many products on as many platforms as possible.


NETCOM NetCruiser - [World Wide Web: Style Guide for Online Hypertext]
File Edit View Internet WWW Settings Window Help
http://info.cern.ch/hypertext/WWW/Provider/Style/Ov
Style Guide for online hypertext
This guide is designed to help you create a WWW hypertext database that effectively communicates your knowledge to the reader. It has been prepared in the light of comments by readers, and many demands by providers of online documentation. Some of the points made may be influenced by personal preference, and some may be common sense, but a collection of points has been demanded, and so here it is.
The guide is designed to be read sequentially, but feel free to depart from this. The sections are as follows:
Introduction
Etiquette for a server administrators
Overall structure of a work
Within each document
Test your document
Background reading
Reader comments

This classic style guide by Tim Berners-Lee, a creator of the World Wide Web, was itself recognized for document design in the Best of the Web '94 contest. See the box for the full address.

Who, When and Why

The Web is timeless—information that you post today can still be available a month or a year from now. Because of this, it can be difficult for users to tell when a Web page was created, who created it, and whether the information presented is still accurate. **Help your readers by "signing" your pages with the <ADDRESS> tag.** This tag is usually used to give the name of the page's creator and a way to contact that person—directly, if the user has a Web browser that supports the mailto protocol.

Including your e-mail address will let users contact you and provide feedback on your Web page. Posting the date that you last updated the page will let users know that the information is timely. For instance, you might put the following line of HTML code at the end of a home page:

```
Created on 6/1/95 by Arlo Cats <ADDRESS>arlo@pets.com
</ADDRESS>
```

Become a Web Critic

The Web itself offers the best opportunity to acquire an eye for good Web design. Become a Web observer. Check out the University of Buffalo's Best of the Web '94 awards at **http://wings.buffalo.edu/contest/awards/design.html**. Or, join WebCrit, the new mailing list devoted to criticizing Web pages: send a message to listproc@popco.com with **subscribe webcrit** in the body. It's a spinoff of INET-Marketing.

©1995 Thompson Publishing Group